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ABSTRACT

Smart Start is North Carolina's partnership between state government and local leaders, service providers, and families to better serve children under 6 years of age and their families. Interviews were conducted to ascertain the impressions, attitudes, and advice of 55 key participants in the 12 pioneer Smart Start counties. The interviews were conducted by the senior faculty and staff of the University of North Carolina evaluation team to assess the state of the partnerships from the point of view of individuals who had participated actively in team building and decision-making in the first year. The prominent issues emerging from these interviews include: (1) the collaboration process; (2) impressions of two of the formal mechanisms for promoting collaboration, the County Collaboration meetings, and the coaches who were assigned to assist counties; (3) observations about the challenge of involving parents in steering Smart Start; (4) suggestions for strategies to better implement Smart Start; (5) recommendations for negotiating the relationship between local partnerships and the state; and (6) the vision and motivation that inspire the work of these key Smart Start participants. (The interview guide is appended.) (KB)

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KEEPING THE VISION IN FRONT OF YOU: RESULTS FROM SMART START KEY PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Report to the Department of Human Resources

by the Smart Start Evaluation Team

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May, 1995

This report was written by Donna Bryant and Amee Adkins. It is based on interviews conducted by and input from all evaluation team members. A list of evaluation team members is attached. We want to thank all respondents in the Smart Start counties who participated in the interviews and thoughtfully and eloquently gave us their opinions.

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KEEPING THE VISION IN-FRONT OF YOU:
RESULTS FROM SMART START KEY PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the impressions, attitudes, and advice of 55 key participants in the 12 pioneer Smart Start counties. Interviews were conducted by the senior faculty and staff of the UNC evaluation team to assess the state of the partnerships from the point of view of individuals who had participated actively in team building and decision making in the first year. The prominent issues which emerged from these interviews include:

- the process of collaboration,
- impressions of two of the formal mechanisms for promoting collaboration, the County Collaboration meetings and the coaches who were assigned to assist the counties,
- observations about the challenge of involving parents in steering Smart Start,
- suggestions for strategies to better implement Smart Start,
- recommendations for negotiating the relationship between local partnerships and the State, and
- the vision and motivation that inspire the work of these key Smart Start participants.

Collaboration

Collaboration was the most prominent of all the major issues faced by teams in the first year. There was general satisfaction with the breadth of the partnership teams, but many respondents were concerned that their board included too many agency heads who were less knowledgeable about service delivery issues at the day-to-day level. More "front-line" members were recommended. Arriving at consensus decisions had been a challenge for large partnership boards. Keeping everyone involved had required extensive personal contacts via phone calls, visits, and meetings. In the first year of Smart Start, the interviewees had contributed a median of 520 hours, or about 10 hours per week, of volunteer time. This level of commitment was significant and necessary to successful collaboration, but may not be so easily obtained in

subsequent years. Methods to sustain the collaborative process with less intense volunteer efforts are needed.

Trust is a major prerequisite for effective collaboration, including trust in the goals of Smart Start, in the process of local decision-making, and among team members. Trust involves listening, showing respect, getting to know each other, communicating openly and frequently. These strategies seemed especially necessary in counties that reported the added challenge of dealing with prejudice and racism.

Conflicts over the distribution of resources or the protection of certain services were not mentioned as major issues for the respondents from the pioneer partnerships, although they did sometimes occur. Board members from different agencies were reported to differ in preferred procedures, flexibility, and openness to innovation. The challenge for the partnerships has been to blend the *best* practices of public and private, non-profit and for-profit groups into their decision-making procedures and not to be hindered by the *worst* practices. For everyone, this has required new ways of thinking about collaborative decision-making.

Communication with the community has been essential so as not to replicate services already provided, to identify needs not met by existing services, and to tell the entire community what Smart Start would offer. A major challenge to many teams has been to achieve a common understanding of Smart Start and early childhood issues within their community as well as their board. There was strong feeling that achieving a common understanding was necessary at the State level, as well.

The County Collaboration Process

The County Collaboration process was intended to help teams work together. The four-day work sessions were perceived as helpful because they provided time necessary for teams to meet, build trust, and accomplish several tasks. Meeting with staff from the Division of Child Development was perceived as most helpful and some of the individual speaker sessions were helpful. The two main criticisms of the work sessions were that they needed to be shortened by a day or two and that the strategic planning process needed to match the counties' planning status more closely.

Respondents' view of the coaching process were generally quite positive. Characteristics and behaviors of the coaches that were appreciated by county participants included their

objectivity and compassion, and their abilities to keep the team on task, facilitate discussion, and help manage conflict. In addition to the help that the coach provided, many respondents believed that more help with program development for children and families was needed.

Parents

Across all of the pioneer counties, including low-income parents in meaningful ways in the decision-making that affects services directly relevant to them has been difficult. Parents hesitated to participate fully in their local partnerships because they generally did not feel a part of the process, whether due to their own insecurity or to a perceived lack of respect from others. In spite of some of their reported problems in expressing their opinions, parents recognized that they brought a unique perspective to the team, as did most other respondents. Many teams have made significant efforts to improve parent participation and involvement. However, no partnership was satisfied with the current level. Most were aware of the need to give this process more thought, attention, and action.

Implementation

Many respondents commented on the complexity of the logistics of implementing Smart Start in their county or region, including developing operational procedures, defining the role of and hiring the executive director, and establishing collaboration. To most, the time was inadequate for planning and implementing innovative efforts that were truly locally responsive. Many respondents mentioned the need to monitor programs and suggested ways to do so, although many claimed to need help in this area. Implementation of programs seemed to proceed more smoothly if the leadership was perceived to be neutral, that is not vested in a given program or service. Characteristics of leaders in whom teams had confidence included good communication and consensus-building skills, an ability to put people at ease, knowledge of the local community, and a willingness to work long hours.

Local Smart Start decision making changed as the *ad hoc* grant-writing team evolved into the official county Partnership Board for Children. Most partnerships have chosen to work in small committees with planning teams or executive committees making some preliminary decisions before bringing items to the full board. This is efficient but limits full-board discussion of all issues, a process that can help teams develop shared assumptions, and ensures broad-based

decision making. The challenge has been to balance full discussion and involvement with efficient implementation.

Many counties had faced the dilemma between publicizing and promoting Smart Start versus moving deliberately forward with publicity only when there is something to show for it. Different counties had chosen to follow different routes. Understanding their communities, fostering community "ownership" of Smart Start procedures and projects, and updating legislators and other potential funders were key aspects of community involvement for these respondents. Concern for the best ways to publicize their efforts and ground Smart Start more deeply in the community will likely remain an issue for all partnerships.

Relations with the State

Many interview respondents emphasized that, to be effective, Smart Start must be defined locally and according to local needs. Much concern was expressed that the State "guidelines" tended to become hard and fast "rules," which impeded implementation of potentially effective new interventions or service delivery models that did not fit within these "rules." Several respondents spoke of the "mandated" aspects of this program with some frustration. The tension between county decision-making and centrally-located, state-level regulation has existed from the beginning of Smart Start. At the time of these interviews, the relationship continued to frustrate partnership participants at the local level.

Rising to the Challenge

The interviews make clear that the vision and goals of Smart Start are profoundly important to members of the local partnerships, although implementing Smart Start can be extremely taxing. The long-term impact of Smart Start is still a hope for them, but the immediate, tangible results of their partnership's work seem to be an effective antidote to the burn out that the intensity of the process may cause. Many respondents talked of the personal rewards of their work on the partnership: learning more about their own county, feeling more powerful, trying to improve life for families, knowing they could now pick up the phone and call any number of people for information or advice, and personal growth. The difficulties of planning, implementing, and shepherding Smart Start are overcome, according to the interviewees, by "being willing to lay it out on the table and be honest" and "keeping the vision in front of you." Respondents were optimistic that they would find new ways to include parents

more fully, resolve obstacles to implementing local plans, and develop productive relations with State agencies. Their primary motivation was the future of North Carolina's young children.

A more detailed report of these interviews begins on the next page.

KEEPING THE VISION IN FRONT OF YOU:
RESULTS FROM SMART START KEY PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Smart Start is North Carolina's partnership among state government and local leaders, service providers, and families to better serve children under 6 and their families. Smart Start's innovative approach requires that local community partnerships plan how best to meet their own community's needs, improve and expand previous programs for children and families, and design and implement new programs. Smart Start activities generally have occurred in four major areas: early childhood education and care, family support services, health services, and service integration/systems change. Improvements in these areas are to promote the major objective of ensuring that children are healthy and prepared to succeed when they enter school.

The evaluation of Smart Start is being conducted by faculty and staff at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill--researchers from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center and the Schools of Education, Public Health, and Social Work. One component of the evaluation is focused on the process of establishing and maintaining Smart Start goals and activities. In the first eight months of planning and implementation, evaluation team members observed local partnerships coming together as teams, discussing their goals and objectives, and making decisions about services and activities. The first product of this field work was the Lessons Learned report of May, 1994, which summarized the first year's findings regarding team building, systems change, and start-up. More systematically collected information was needed to verify the initial perceptions and to elaborate on specific questions concerning collaboration. We obtained that information through a series of key participant interviews, summarized in this report.

Key Participant Interview Methodology

In the summer and fall of 1994, about one year after the first twelve Smart Start partnerships heard the good news of their inclusion in the state program, 55 key participants at the local levels were interviewed by the senior faculty and staff of the UNC evaluation team. The purpose of these interviews was to assess the state of the partnerships from the point of view of individuals who had participated actively in team building and decision making in the first

year. Most of that year was spent organizing, incorporating as a non-profit agency, developing systems of decision making, working in committees, and planning. By mid-1994 implementation of many local Smart Start efforts was finally underway: it was a good time to take stock.

Fifty-five interviews were conducted between July and October, 1994, with UNC evaluation team members choosing interviewees who filled specific roles on the local partnership teams. The team leader was interviewed and, when teams shared leadership, the co-leader was interviewed. If an executive director had been hired, she was interviewed. A partnership team member who represented a public agency was included in the interviews (i.e., Department of Social Services or Mental Health). A parent and a representative of the child care community were interviewed. If the partnership did not include an active participant in one of these categories, the interviewer selected another person who had been an active participant in the first year of work, for example, a member of the business community.

We attempted to schedule five key participant interviews in each county or region, with the interviews accomplished by the researcher on the evaluation team who had kept in touch with the county and its work by attending County Collaboration and other local meetings. Three to six individuals were interviewed in 11 Smart Start counties. One researcher left the evaluation team at this time, so another researcher not as familiar with the county interviewed one key individual there. The interviews followed a relatively prescribed set of questions and topics devised by the evaluation team, although the interviewer was free to pursue different issues that arose. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours. About half were conducted in person and about half over the phone. Interviews were not recorded, although extensive notes were taken during the interviews and elaborated upon after the interview. All interviews were read and analyzed by the members of the evaluation team who have written this report. A copy of the interview protocol is included as an appendix.

The aim of the key participant interviews was to gather the participants' views of the collaborative process and their advice for future participants in an effort of this nature. The prominent issues which emerged from these interviews include:

- the process of collaboration,
- impressions of two of the formal mechanisms for promoting collaboration, the County Collaboration meetings and the coaches who were assigned to assist the counties,
- observations about the challenge of involving parents in steering Smart Start,
- suggestions for strategies to better implement Smart Start,
- recommendations for negotiating the relationship between local partnerships and the State, and
- the vision and motivation that inspire the work of these key Smart Start participants.

In this report we summarize the most salient points made by these key members of the local partnership teams. We have tried to use quotations from the interviews to illustrate key points and to indicate when the points were made by a clear majority of respondents or were the thoughtful ideas of just a few. However, this document should not be read prescriptively. New and future Smart Start counties in many ways face circumstances that are significantly different from those of the first "pioneer" counties. Local teams in the new counties have had more time to organize their resource personnel and to consider their options for initial projects. They also have had the opportunity "to find out what it was like" through direct inquiries to existing local partnerships or through reading the evaluation team's initial Lessons Learned report. And, a great variety of circumstances, resources, and problems are present in the counties and even within different communities within the counties. The information presented here, therefore, is not intended to *guide* new partnerships so much as *to draw attention to* commonly experienced questions and phenomena. As one agency administrator advised, one must "recognize that all counties aren't alike."

Collaboration

The interviews revealed that collaboration was the most prominent of all the major issues and processes addressed by teams in the first year. Indeed, several interviewees recommend that new teams consciously make collaboration and team-building an immediate priority. Establishing an agreed-upon collaborative process provides the foundation for effective decision making at later stages. As one respondent said, "Spend time developing a common

understanding of early childhood needs and services; you need a knowledge base to create a common set of assumptions." To many, it seemed that these assumptions were most severely tested when it came time to make funding decisions. Then, they found that the "common understanding" was not so accepted, after all. Many dimensions of collaboration were mentioned in the interviews, including the collaborations among members within the team, collaboration between the community and the partnership, and collaboration as a philosophy for action. These dimensions of collaboration are addressed in turn in the next sections.

Collaboration within the Partnership Team

Breadth and size of board. Successful collaboration within the team required first that the partnership reflect the breadth of the community by "getting the right people around the table." In some cases this was accomplished in advance via the presence of specific people on the board as mandated by the Smart Start legislation. In other cases, local partnerships had to pick representatives of the particular needs and resources in the county. Another observation made by one interviewee is the advantage of including "a mixture of personalities, working styles and strengths" to accomplish more effectively the variety of tasks required. Both kinds of breadth seem to result in a more flexible team with a richer community perspective.

Although there was general satisfaction with the breadth of the partnership teams, several respondents were concerned that their partnership board included too many agency heads. These individuals were sometimes reported as too busy to attend meetings or not well informed about day-to-day service. Some interviewees wondered whether a middle manager or service coordinator might better represent an agency. A few comments were made about efforts to get mandated board members interested and involved. For example, "it's hard to get them to sign off on something that they know nothing about" (because they haven't attended meetings). Some respondents reported that their partnerships had received special approval from the Department of Human Resources to substitute certain categories of board membership with others, but it is not clear if this policy was known by or could be followed by all counties, if needed.

Several key participants noted the operational challenges of having a large board. Sometimes even getting a quorum had been a problem. As one respondent said,

> We have a mandated 20 people on the Board and in an effort to involve people from the community, we added 11 more. To get everyone to attend a meeting and arrive at a consensus is difficult.

To enhance participation, respondents mentioned alternating meeting times and places so that everyone could attend at least some partnership and committee meetings, providing opportunities for everyone's input at the meetings, and staying focused during the meetings. By far, though, the most frequently mentioned strategy to keep everyone involved in the collaboration was personal contact. Thousands of phone calls and visits have been made by hundreds of Smart Start participants, including these interviewees, to involve a broad and representative group of citizens from their communities.

Time. Along with broad representation on local partnership boards, respondents recognized that time and energy must be spent to develop the depth of participation needed for a truly collaborative effort. The majority of interview respondents were able to use their calendars and meeting schedules to calculate the approximate number of hours they had devoted to Smart Start in the year preceding the interviews. Not including the Executive Directors, whose long hours were covered by a salary, the range of hours contributed to Smart Start by these key participants was from 148 to 1,500, with a median of 520 hours. This amounted to about 10 hours a week of volunteer time devoted to team meetings, subcommittee meetings, phone contacts, team building, grant writing, project development, talks to other community groups, and attending statewide meetings. Viewed another way, it appears that key Smart Start participants have another 25% job, in addition to their other work or family obligations. Almost every respondent commented on the amount of time and energy needed to pull Smart Start together. A few of their comments are below:

> I find myself staying up nights doing the things I get paid to do so I can work on Smart Start during the day.

> The biggest problem is you have to give up so much of your time. Smart Start becomes more than just a program; it becomes a way of life. You must really commit to it.

> Such a time commitment is not one that an individual can keep pace with for an extended period of time.

The volunteer hours of work that have gone into the development of the first 12 partnerships should be acknowledged for several reasons. First, the commitment of community leaders, parents, agency representatives and others is significant and necessary to successful

collaboration. Second, the hours contributed willingly in the first year to get the partnerships off to a good start will not be so easily obtained in the second and subsequent years. Many very committed individuals pointed out that they had "burned out" after one year. The collaborative process must improve so it can be sustained with less intense volunteer efforts. Finally, the substantial monetary value of the collaborative effort should be acknowledged. Using the median hours worked (520) and a conservative $10/hour rate of pay (conservative because many of the respondents were business and agency leaders paid significantly more than $10/hour), our 55 interview respondents alone contributed almost $300,000 of labor to the start-up of Smart Start. Another 10-30 individuals whom we did not interview contributed many hours in each of the pioneer partnerships. If the cost of their volunteer labor were calculated and added to that of the key participants, over one million dollars worth of volunteer effort was put into the planning and development of the pioneer partnerships in the first year.

Trust. The key partnership players frequently used the word "trust" when talking about effective collaboration, referring to trust in the goals of Smart Start, in the process of local decision making, and in their fellow team members. At its most basic, trust involves listening: "The best thing a team can do is listen to each other." In addition to listening, respondents observed that trust involved putting their faith in the larger processes and mechanisms of the partnership, such as committee-based recommendations, consensus decision making, and the meaning of dissent. Trust was associated with feeling respected and being a part of a common process. "Getting to know others as people, not as an agency affiliation" helped to build trust. Although many complaints were voiced about the time spent on process and team-building, one team leader summarized, "You need adequate time to develop trust, to bond, to build relationships, and to assimilate into a new process."

Complementary to trusting each other was knowing each other. Several participants acknowledged the value of "spend[ing] time learning about one another's interests and positions." More than personal familiarity; this also meant pooling professional and practical knowledge about the issues at hand and about their community. Such practical knowledge increases the range of options to serve children and families.

Communication. Open and frequent communication helped collaboration, several interviewees mentioned. The need to discuss issues openly, both within and outside the

partnership, was also noted. One agency director said, "We all had to learn not to be defensive and to listen." Another respondent recommended, "When you have problems, speak up: festering problems were almost the death of this board. We were all just too polite to talk out."

Some interviewees discussed their perception that prejudice and racism were still obstacles to effective collaboration within their counties. They noted that open communication, direct discussions of prejudice, and working together for the benefit of all children were ways they had addressed this age-old problem within their Smart Start team.

Turf protection. By and large, conflicts over the distribution of resources or the protection of certain services were not mentioned as major issues for the respondents from the pioneer partnerships, although they did sometimes occur. Work within teams involved some protection of one's own turf. As one team leader stated, "It was good that the project wasn't costing any agency something--turf issues only arose when dividing the [new Smart Start] money." Another respondent noted that the next step of collaboration would, however, cost something: "Individuals and agencies will have to give up part of their pie." This respondent was forecasting the relatively greater difficulty of the inevitable task of stretching limited resources to serve as many children and families as possible.

Several interviewees, mindful of the possibility of turf problems, were prepared to "face them head-on." Respondents mentioned two ways in which turfism might impede effective collaboration: 1) some people might drift away from the collaborative process once funds were distributed, and 2) some representatives might participate in the partnership only to protect their piece of the funding pie. New and old partnerships need to be aware of both threats and find effective ways to respond to them (e.g., conflict of interest policies for board members and member agencies).

Turf issues arose not just over allocations, but also over procedures. As one respondent stated, "Agency heads tend to think in terms of their agency structure. We need to change the usual way of thinking and challenge the system and the assumptions." Another respondent believed that "non-profits tended to be more flexible and have more vision for doing things in substantially different ways," which then enhanced collaboration. The challenge for the partnerships has been to blend the *best* practices of public and private, non-profit and for-profit

groups into their decision-making procedures and not to be hindered by the *worst* practices. For everyone, this has required new ways of thinking about collaborative decision-making.

Collaboration between the Partnership Team and the Community

The second dimension of collaboration mentioned in the interviews was collaboration between the community and the partnership for the purpose of linking Smart Start more effectively to the community it serves. In this aspect of collaboration, the local partnerships worked first to "make sure [they] know what [their] community is already doing" and to "identify needs and work from there." The partnerships were assuming a new role of service organizer and coordinator in their communities. To accomplish that effectively, communication with the community was essential to many of our respondents so as not to replicate services already provided, to identify needs not met by existing services, and to tell the entire community what Smart Start would offer. In one county, a respondent described how better communication had already led to a more efficient expenditure of resources, freeing up $25,000 for a new program. While the key participants thought that collaboration within the team seemed essential to effective decision-making, many mentioned collaboration beyond the team, with the community at-large, as equally essential to successful implementation of those decisions.

Collaboration as a Philosophy for Action

Another dimension of collaboration that appeared in the interviews was the shared philosophy that drives the decisions and programs of the local partnerships. As stated by one respondent, "a major challenge has been to achieve a common understanding of Smart Start and early childhood issues." It might seem obvious, but teams collaborate more effectively when their members are working towards shared goals and from "a common set of assumptions." Team members might have thought they shared certain goals and assumptions when they were stated broadly (as often happened early in the process), but as partnerships faced the daily details of decision-making and implementation, some found much less consensus. Thus, many interviewees suggested that, early in the process, teams "spend time to develop a common understanding . . . [and] a common set of assumptions." A few respondents also mentioned that this effort would be helpful at the State level, as well, because shared understandings and expectations were needed among the Department of Human Resources, the Division of Child Development, and the partnerships.

How teams define their tasks is a second aspect to collaboration as a philosophy of action. Some interviewees noted the value in setting goals and objectives that could only be met by multiple agencies and participants, or, as stated by one respondent, "Identify early what you want to achieve and define it larger than any one agency." Such goals and objectives insure that Smart Start *can only be achieved* collaboratively, rather than becoming the domain of one or two team members or agencies. As one interviewee noted, a collaborative philosophy leads team members away from asking, "What can I do for kids?" They have to learn to ask, "What do kids need?"

The County Collaboration Process

The County Collaboration process was an intensive vision development and planning process required of Smart Start county participants. The goals of the County Collaboration were to help teams work together to detail the needs of children and families in their counties, develop strategic plans to meet those needs, and implement the plans they developed. In short, the County Collaboration was intended to help county teams achieve the positive aspects of collaboration that have been mentioned in the previous section. Concretely, the County Collaboration consisted of (a) three 4-day work sessions during which participants met with experts in human service systems, (b) 60 days of technical assistance from a coach, a person from outside the county who helped county teams design and organize their plans, and (c) Covey leadership training which was also offered to all counties. In the key participant interviews, we asked direct questions about the work sessions and the coaching process as methods of helping the county teams achieve real collaboration.

Work Sessions

Participants mentioned both positive and negative aspects of the County Collaboration meetings. The most helpful component of the meetings was the time to work together as a team. During these individual work sessions, teams were able to build trust and accomplish several major tasks. Some respondents mentioned that day-long retreats in their own counties served this useful purpose, too.

The County Collaboration work sessions provided helpful opportunities for teams to meet together with staff from the Division of Child Development. These county team appointments with DCD staff enabled teams to efficiently obtain information about the issues they were currently facing. General workshop sessions did not always meet the individual team's needs.

In general, team members appreciated the opportunity the work sessions provided to meet together for intensive periods of time. While valuing the time, interview respondents also made several specific suggestions for improvement. Some expressed the need for more local team control of the agenda. Some team members were frustrated by the strategic planning process model that they felt was imposed on them during the meetings. One stated it this way, "We paid a price for following the coach's agenda instead of our own." Some respondents noted that this model did not always match their work back home. Another frustrating aspect was the expectation that all counties would move through the model at a similar pace. It would be more helpful if counties were allowed to progress at their own pace.

Finally, several respondents, even those who really appreciated the work sessions, mentioned that the length of the meetings was a problem. Many individuals in their counties who might have been key participants in the Smart Start effort were not able to take so many days away from their work (9 work days to attend all 3 meetings). This was true for business, agency, and parent representatives. Respondents also would have liked the meetings to be more centrally located so that travel time was decreased. Others expressed frustration regarding the reimbursement system -- some people weren't able to attend the meetings because they did not have the money to pay for meals. In spite of these specific criticisms and concerns, respondents generally thought that intensive team work sessions, both at the County Collaboration meetings and at home in their counties, were necessary for effective team building.

The Coaching Process

Respondents' views of the coaching process of the County Collaboration depended to a great degree on their experiences with their specific coach, the person who had been assigned to their county. Almost all respondents appreciated the efforts of their coach, even if they did not think the coaching process was successful or even necessary in their county. Overall, the majority of the respondents (68%) were positive; 22%, negative; and the rest, neutral or undecided.

Characteristics and behaviors of the coaches that were appreciated by county participants included their objectivity and compassion, and their abilities to keep the team on task, facilitate discussion, and help manage conflict. Interestingly, in one county all respondents appreciated the coach for being their liaison with the staff at DCD and DHR. Characteristics and behaviors

of the coaches that were mentioned as not helpful were essentially the opposites of those mentioned above: lack of objectivity, inadequate ability to manage conflict or facilitate collaboration, and pushing his or her own agenda. Several respondents (including some of those who viewed the overall process of coaching positively) mentioned that there seemed to be too much emphasis on process and not enough on content.

Many suggestions for future selection, training, and use of coaches were made by respondents. Many were unclear about the role of their coach. The intent for counties to define the role of their own coach was not well understood by these key participants. Coaches and team members need to hear this message several times in the beginning of the process. The importance of good preparation for coaches became clear in the interview; although rare, when a coach was unprepared or failed to attend a key meeting, team members were clearly angry because they themselves were giving the project so much.

Finally, the coaches' role in the collaborative effort and in the necessary content needed by team members to participate in the process were discussed frequently by the interview respondents. In the first year, county team members needed more technical or content information--how various family and child care programs might operate, specific strategies for implementing new efforts, etc. Because their coach was with them quite frequently, teams turned to the coach for many different kinds of help and were sometimes disappointed by not getting everything they wanted/needed. Many respondents also believed that more technical assistance (TA) from the Department (or elsewhere) was needed. If other TA providers become involved with counties, both coaches and TA providers should be very clear about their individual roles and understand well what each other can do for/with the counties.

In summary, most respondents viewed the work sessions and the coaches' efforts quite positively. The main concern of those who did not positively view the County Collaboration was that too much emphasis and time were placed on the process of planning and team-building. Overall, these activities were reported to lead to a team process in which members could develop local ownership of the initiative and the decisions. A sense of ownership, in turn, was reported to lead to feeling a personal stake in Smart Start that carried team members through difficult and challenging times.

Parents

When the authorizing legislation mandated the appointment of parent representatives to the local partnerships, many applauded this recognition of the value and necessity of the parent perspective in devising strategies to better serve their children and themselves. As stated by one respondent, "The viewpoint from low-income parents is absolutely essential." The interview results suggest that there is still much work to be done to maximize the involvement and influence of low-income parents in Smart Start. Across all of the pioneer counties, adequate parent participation and involvement was reported to be a difficult issue facing the partnerships.

Early in the first year of Smart Start, local teams recognized the logistical obstacles for parent representatives, such as child care requirements and transportation needs, as well as cash advances to allow parents to attend County Collaboration meetings out of town. At the time of the interviews, most teams had established ways to cope with those logistical issues, but most of the parent respondents mentioned additional interpersonal issues that affected their level of participation and involvement in the teams' activities. In this section, we outline the ongoing challenges concerning parent representatives, as newly articulated in the interviews.

Involvement and participation of parent members of the partnerships was a concern of 75% of the respondents and mentioned in at least one interview from each of the twelve pioneer programs. All but one parent respondent mentioned the difficult role of parents on the partnership boards, and over half of the agency, business, childcare and other respondents talked about parent involvement. It is clearly a topic of great interest and concern. The information in the interviews does not tell us how long and how deeply the parent representatives had been thinking about these issues, but it seems clear that the problems they acknowledged were (and continue to be) pervasive. When asked to give advice to hypothetical future partnership members, parent interviewees addressed their remarks directly to future *parent* members whereas other interviewees spoke to generic future partnership members. This suggests that even in the context of talking about Smart Start, economically disadvantaged parents are reticent to communicate much to individuals who are not like themselves or, alternatively, that they believe they have much to offer those who are similar.

Parent Participation

Comments during the interviews revealed a distinction between what it means to "participate" and what it means to be "involved." When parent interviewees spoke of parent participation, they tended to refer to how active they were in meetings, whether the full partnership meetings or smaller committee sessions. "Involvement" for them meant how connected they felt to both the team and the process. Of course, one most obvious kind of participation is attending meetings, and most parent respondents attended many, many meetings, like other team members. Many parents reported reluctance to voice their opinions, especially dissenting opinions, to the larger team. One obvious hindrance is that low-income parent members of the partnership may be receiving direct services for themselves or their child from an agency whose director is also on the board. In this situation, a great deal of trust is required to believe that a dissenting or opposing opinion will not result in some type of recrimination. In the interviews with us, however, parents did mention disagreements with some of the partnerships' plans and ideas.

Parents hesitated to participate fully in their local partnerships because they generally did not feel a part of the process. For some, this resulted from their own insecurity in the company of community leaders; others perceived that their teams did not respect their membership on the local partnership; one did not trust her own inclinations in the face of "expert testimony." Awareness of these factors may help teams that are trying to promote and support more active participation of their parent representatives.

One parent contributed the following suggestion that seems to address most of these concerns:

> Get *more* parents involved. If parents were a larger sub-group, they'd be less inclined to compare themselves with more educated and experienced members. [That also might] undo the team perception that parents are "add-ons" and that they could do without the parents.

Whether or not teams just increase the number of parents, greater parent participation is needed in all partnerships.

In spite of some of their reported problems in expressing their opinions, parents recognized that they brought a unique perspective to the team. Though other board members had children, one lower-income parent pointed out, "Just because you have kids does not mean you

understand the needs and perspective of low-income families." Although they believed they were valuable to the team, many parents claimed not to have been very effective team members. They nevertheless would encourage future parent representatives: "Be heard"; "Don't be intimidated"; "If you've got an opinion, speak up."

Parent Involvement

The parents interviewed saw parent involvement as the degree to which parents felt a part of Smart Start. Their level of involvement was influenced by the kinds of connections they made with other team members and how much they knew about collaborative decision-making. In many ways, involvement was related to the issue of trust within teams, as discussed previously. One parent expressed her lack of involvement this way: "I didn't do very much. I felt left out. I feel like a nobody."

Other interviewees reported that they drew conclusions from their own experiences to understand what needed to happen for parents to feel connected to the process. For example, parents need to feel that they will be heard. This includes feeling their opinions will be considered and that the people on the team will acknowledge them. Another parent advised, "involve parents in team building early," so that parents can make connections within the team at the same time that others are making crucial connections within the team. As one parent representative noted, "It's a maturing process for the individual and the team."

Non-parent respondents from two counties mentioned two reasons low-income parents feel less involved in Smart Start. One observed that these parents do not have an organized constituency to whom they are responsible as do the agency directors or child care representatives on the team. One team member suggested that their partnership "organize a constituency-feedback mechanism for parents"--a group of parents that their team member could represent and inform. This occurred spontaneously when one parent volunteered to conduct a parent needs assessment and used the information from the surveys to inform the partnership team. A second condition deterring parent involvement was addressed by respondents from another county. Team members acknowledged that many of their colleagues, in their business suits and with their advanced education, could seem intimidating to parents, especially in the business environment of meetings. Their partnership had begun scheduling informal, non-business events, such as a picnic, at which team members, especially parents, could get to know

one another in a casual, more personal setting. Their hope was that this would promote a sense of camaraderie that would carry over into partnership-meetings.

Information gathered in the interviews supported our ongoing observation that it is often difficult to include low-income parents in meaningful ways in the decision-making that affects services directly relevant to them. Many of the respondents representing agencies or other constituencies on the partnership board were aware of this dilemma and reported significant team efforts to improve parent participation and involvement. However, no partnership was satisfied with the current level of parental involvement. Most were aware of the need to give this process more thought, attention, and action.

Implementation

The interviews with key participants also included discussions of central issues the first twelve partnerships faced as they moved from their vision of Smart Start to its implementation. These include logistics of implementation, leadership, decision making, conflict, and community commitment to the implementation of Smart Start, which will be discussed in the sections below.

Implementation Logistics

Many respondents commented on the complexity of the logistics of implementing Smart Start in their county or region. Partnership teams had to develop operational procedures and then accustom the boards, grantees, and other participants to use the procedures. As one interviewee stated, "A big part of this was new to people; everyone was trying to get organized." For some, the newness was the collaborative mechanism, while for others it was the nuances of functioning as a public non-profit organization, working with a group as large as the partnership boards, or complying with state-level directives. Time and effort were required for their team members to master the processes (new teams take note.) This time and effort needed for learning and adjusting may restrict a team's immediate progress towards implementing their goals, but it seemed vital to respondents that team members become comfortable with Smart Start procedures so that they would have trust in the process.

A few interviewees mentioned the importance of organizational and procedural issues: "Take care of organizational matters quickly," and "Clean up procedural things, [e.g.,] clarify the criteria for proposals." Many respondents strongly recommended defining the role of and hiring

the executive director very early in the process to insure smooth implementation of partnership's decisions.

Many respondents mentioned the time pressures placed upon Smart Start implementation. Several commented specifically about the amount of time required to establish collaboration. One team leader stated, "For doing massive planning and collaboration, the time was inadequate." Another respondent noted that there may be a "time pressure to spend money [that] leads to a more fragmented, agency-oriented plan than [the team] would like." As many partnerships had discovered, existing programs can more rapidly get certain new services started or expand existing services to more families and children than can newly designed projects. New projects, especially those that are more collaborative in nature, take longer to implement.

Several respondents were concerned that "people were cheating on collaboration," for example, writing a proposal that *looked* like collaboration, but was in reality business in the usual way. One team member stated, "I don't think referring clients to another agency is 'collaboration.'" Another respondent noted that, although projects might fall short of the partnership's vision for Smart Start, external factors such as time pressures should be considered so that team members do not feel unduly disappointed in their early efforts.

Many respondents spoke of the need to monitor projects. When the enormously time-consuming planning was over, there was still no time to rest. One said that after the planning "you almost need another group to do the work, like caring for the partnership." Another mentioned that once the planning was done, "the biggest thing we hadn't anticipated was who was going to track everything. Somebody has to follow the projects." This challenging task was mentioned by several. Many had difficulty assuring accountability from the agencies whose programs were funded by the partnership. According to some interviewees, a detailed project proposal, once funded via a less-detailed contract from DHR, gave rise to the "that's not in the contract" rationale sometimes given by agencies for not following through with an activity. Departments of health and social services were more often mentioned in this regard, perhaps because the Smart Start moneys were a very small part of their large budgets. (At the time of these interviews, the Division of Child Development and the evaluation team were developing a quarterly reporting system for the partnerships' accountability to the division and for the counties to use to monitor programs.)

Leadership

Leadership decisions and leadership development were other implementation topics discussed by our interviewees. Because the local teams were developing new programs and allocating substantial funds, "'neutrality of leadership was important," one respondent observed. Sometimes business or church leaders who were perceived by their teams as not protecting any specific turf (i.e., daycare, DSS, or Mental Health) helped team decision making. However, having a leader from a non-human services field did not necessarily result in smooth team functioning, some interviewees mentioned. Confidence in the team leader seemed essential to effective team functioning. Consensus-building skills were mentioned by another. Another noted that a leader should know "how to make people comfortable so they will contribute their thoughts and ideas." One requirement of leadership was a willingness to work overtime to coordinate and shepherd the partnership effort.

At times, everyone on the teams needed to be both a leader and a follower. Most members of the board were included because of their leadership of another agency or organization, yet within the partnership not everyone could lead, of course. One interviewee observed that team members had to "try to strike a balance between leadership and participation. Members who are used to authority must remember to sit back." Individuals accustomed to making decisions outright needed to be contributors to decision making, and those who usually carried out decisions made by others needed to become more actively involved in decision making.

Decision Making

One key participant noted that as the *ad hoc* team that prepared the application for Smart Start changed to the official partnership board of directors difficulties were encountered: more people entered into the process, previous understandings had to be negotiated, and new decision-making procedures were put into place. This interviewee thought it might have been better to have had a planning process parallel to subsequent implementation structures, using committees and consensus decision making. Another interviewee noted the obvious bridge between the planning and implementation structures, as well as the problem such transitions can pose: "A weekly core group meeting is too closed. [It's] better to work more in sub-committees and increase participation."

Most partnerships have chosen to work in small committees with planning teams or executive committees making some preliminary decisions before bringing items to the full board. The full board then officially acts. In this regard, executive directors often noted their own doubts about which topics to undertake themselves and which to refer to the board. One executive director commented on "the importance of trying to educate the board, but not influence them. The board needs information to make good decisions." Most key respondents reported that subcommittees, executive committees and the executive director were the first lines of review and/or education, with major decisions referred to the full board. A few respondents worried about the restricted discussion in such a system and preferred more complete discussions of issues by the full board. Two reasons were given: organizational learning occurred in large-group discussions which helped the development of shared assumptions, and the full board is more broadly representative of the community than the executive committee. However, everyone acknowledged the need for a more streamlined process because of the enormous amount of work to be done. The challenge has been to balance full discussion and involvement with efficient implementation.

Conflict

Conflict among team members was inevitable during the implementation Smart Start, according to the interviews. Those interviewed recommended facing this reality early in the partnership's development. But one respondent said, "People shouldn't be afraid of conflict." Some suggested exploring the diversity of perspectives within the team and facing "the issue of conflict of interest early," so that problems don't suddenly arise and impede the implementation of local plans. One respondent encouraged individual team members, "When you have problems with something, speak up. Festering problems were almost the death of this board. We're all just too polite to talk out." Team members need to be open and non-judgmental with each other from the outset and need skills to deal with and resolve issues without personalizing disagreement. A clear and fair decision-making process with specified steps to manage conflict also reduces problems. Overall, the respondents believed that it was almost impossible to avoid conflict within the partnership, and recommended strategies to deal with conflict constructively. Conflict can be positive when it leads to new resolutions.

Community Commitment

Another aspect of implementation addressed by some respondents was the importance of community exposure in moving ahead with local plans for Smart Start. As one respondent said, "You need to get the community involved to get the best out of Smart Start; it's not just another agency thing." Whether to cultivate support from communities for the partnership's efforts or to develop a better, broader understanding of Smart Start programs, spreading the word about Smart Start appeared to be an underestimated task, but one that could help the implementation process if accomplished well.

Community focus groups were deemed helpful to those counties that used them. One child care respondent recommended involving all county child care programs from the very beginning, by holding a forum explaining how centers could obtain and use Smart Start funds. Through presentations to local groups, team members in another county were trying to show people that primary prevention of many problems--crime, school dropouts, teen pregnancy--starts with early childhood education. Several respondents thought that the North Carolina Partnership for Children was going to help with community outreach by preparing materials for dissemination and were disappointed with the speed of this project. [The videotaping project had not been launched at the time of these interviews.]

A few counties had made a conscious decision to "go slow" with their community outreach until "there was something to offer families." In these counties, community visibility was to be linked to operationalizing the programs and at the time of the interviews, this was just beginning to happen in these counties. One thoughtful comment about publicity showed concern for linking programs too closely with Smart Start:

> I want people to know about the important activities, but I want people to think that we, the community, did this and not Smart Start. I don't want people to think that, if Smart Start money goes away, the good things will go away.

These comments illustrate the dilemma between publicizing and promoting Smart Start and moving deliberately forward with publicity only when there is something to show for it. There is also a dilemma between over-promising and being too modest with publicity. Several respondents indicated that these were issues in their counties and it was clear that different counties had chosen to follow different routes.

To some respondents, community involvement also included contact with their Legislative delegation. Many felt they had not sufficiently communicated with their legislators about the obstacles they had overcome, the plans they had made and the good programs being run with Smart Starts funds. For example, everyone *inside* the active partnership group knew that the long planning process, the delay from DHR in obtaining funds, and the desire not to waste taxpayers' dollars led to a surplus of funds in the first year. They did not want to spend funds unwisely just to spend them quickly. Too late did partnership members realize that people *outside* the network, particularly legislators, might perceive this as a lack of need. Keeping legislators informed appeared to have moved higher up the list of partnership priorities for year two.

Understanding their communities, fostering community "ownership" of Smart Start procedures and projects, and updating legislators and other potential funders were key aspects of community involvement for these respondents. Concern for the best ways to publicize their efforts and to ground Smart Start more deeply in the community continues for the pioneer county team members and will likely remain an issue.

Relations with the State

During the interviews, many respondents reflected on their experiences with the state agency overseeing their local initiatives and shared their conclusions about developing an effective relationship between the two. One team leader phrased this point dramatically:

> "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. Local autonomy is not natural; therefore, constant negotiation with the State is necessary."

According to others interviewed, negotiation included: (1) "getting all of the information that the State has available and keeping it in reserve" for reference; (2) finding "someone strong enough to fight the State to change things" when that is necessary for the partnerships to be effective; and (3) developing "a clear understanding with the State of reciprocal expectations" so that the two are working together rather than at cross purposes. These areas of negotiation seemed necessary to the respondents because local partnerships, and the Department of Human Resources, were learning as they moved forward which aspects of conventional state-to-county bureaucratic processes are contrary to a localized initiative such as Smart Start and which are necessary. Local teams and DHR needed open and frequent communication so that DHR can develop

procedures conducive to the progress of Smart Start and the counties can understand the rules and expectations.

Concerning relations with the State, many interview respondents emphasized that, to be effective, Smart Start must be defined locally and according to local needs. One team member reminded future partnerships to "identify the county's needs first and then figure out how to fit them into the State guidelines." Much concern was expressed that the State "guidelines" tended to become hard and fast "rules," which impeded implementation of potentially effective new interventions or service delivery models that did not fit within these "rules." The "must haves memo" was mentioned by several respondents. This list of new expectations was sent by DHR to the counties about 6 months into their planning process, right at the time when implementation was underway. The memo was perceived as an example of guidelines becoming rules after the fact and an example of the obstacles that State rules place in the way of local initiatives. One respondent suggested that partnerships could maintain their own perspective by looking at the guidelines after their own goals had been established.

Several respondents spoke of the "mandated" aspects of this program with some frustration: "There's a new pet project that's strongly suggested almost every time we turn around." "It feels like the State is having a real hard time with the idea of keeping their hands off. They fall back on old systems because they don't know how to handle local control." The tension between county decision-making and centrally-located, state-level regulation has existed from the beginning of Smart Start. At the time of these interviews, the relationship continued to frustrate partnership participants at the local level.

Rising to the Challenge

The interviews make clear that the vision and goals of Smart Start are profoundly important to members of the local partnerships, although implementing Smart Start can be extremely taxing. When asked, "What would you tell a member of a future Smart Start team?" many interviewees included words of inspiration and encouragement intended to support new partnership members through whatever challenges the process might pose. A child care representative offered, "I have *seen* Smart Start make a difference in the county." A team leader noted, "The road is hard, and in many ways painful, but it is worthwhile." An executive director said, "Get ready for the ride of your life!"

Several interviewees commented that they "look for the thrills when you see the results of the work you've done." Their energies are renewed when they "go out and see things happen with children." The long-term impact of Smart Start is still a hope for them, but the immediate, tangible results of their partnership's work seems to be an effective antidote to the burn out that the intensity of the process may cause.

Many respondents talked of the personal rewards of their work on the partnership: learning more about their own county, feeling more powerful, trying to improve life for families, knowing they could now pick up the phone and call any number of people for information or advice, and personal growth. Many appreciated the opportunity to attend Covey leadership training seminars which were offered through the Community Collaboration. At least one business leader became so sold on the consensus team approach to problem solving that he changed the way he ran his business. Although they worked long hours on behalf of Smart Start, these respondents appreciated the opportunities it provided to them personally, as well as to children and families in their counties.

What does it take, then, for partnership participants to survive the difficulties of planning, implementing, and shepherding Smart Start? Our interview respondents said it best. One has to "be willing to lay it out on the table and be honest," because of what is at stake. One must "keep the vision in front of you" because that is the incentive to learn effective collaboration. One must find new ways to include parents more fully, to resolve obstacles to implementing local plans, and to develop productive relations with State agencies.

We close this summary of Smart Start's implementation to date with a comment made by a partnership team member from the business community:

> I perceive Smart Start to be a once in a lifetime opportunity. I seriously doubt that at any other point in my lifetime this kind of attention and money will be made available to young children. This is the pinnacle.....consequently, I made my decision to put my efforts into this opportunity. What we do now is so important for the future of young children.

Smart Start Key Informant Interview Guide
Team Leader, Executive Director, Day Care Representative, Non-Traditional Stakeholder (e.g., parent), and one other Key Member

Guidelines:

Enclosed you will find one interview guide printed on one page, as well as another guide with only one question per page. Depending on which you are more comfortable with, record your interview notes directly on these pages or separately. If you use a tape recorder, be sure to also take notes anyway. If you don't the tape recorder will malfunction--it's the law in qualitative research. Please include the tapes with your selective transcription just in case. Finally, regardless of the form in which you record your interviews, be sure that on all documentation you indicate which category of informant is responding. Names are not necessary.

Remember these are only guidelines. Familiarize yourself with the spirit of the information these questions drive toward, and then conduct your interviews as conversations with these informants about their experiences and perceptions of the Smart Start process. The probes which follow each question (indicated with "--") are there to facilitate the interview. If an informant doesn't understand the question, or if the question doesn't spark the conversation, use them as back-ups. They also serve as a checklist for some of the details we are looking for. Thus, if an informant provides all the information in their first response, skip to the next relevant probe or question. Follow interesting tangents, but try to cover at a minimum the questions in the interview guide. Also in the spirit of a conversation, you do not necessarily need to work through the given order of the interview guide.

For those stepping up to the field test challenge, after each interview, briefly note your own responses to the interview guide, including which questions worked and didn't and any spontaneous adjustments you made.

Introduce yourself and why you asked for this interview. A suggestion follows. Remind them that their comments will be confidential, and nothing will be attributed distinctly to their county.
Thank you for finding some time for this interview. The Evaluation Team in Chapel Hill thought that interviewing some of the Partnership members in each county we could build a more complete picture of how the Partnerships actually worked through their first year. We are looking for a sense of what features and innovations were particularly helpful, which ones were not so helpful, and perhaps which were some necessary evils. We also would like you to evaluate the structures laid out from the State, including the County Collaboration process and the composition of the Board of Directors.

Let's begin with your role with the Smart Start Partnership.
--how long have you been working with the team
--which committees, task forces, etc. do you work with
--what is your life outside Smart Start, i.e., occupation, role in community, etc.

Tell me about your own experiences with Smart Start.
--how did you first become involved, e.g., invited, sought out
--estimate hours given, e.g., per week, outside team meetings
--feelings of inclusion/exclusion from important processes, decisions, on your behalf or others' that you perceived

Reflect on your experiences in the first year of Smart Start, and imagine that you are talking to a member of a future Smart Start team. What do you tell them about, e.g., tips, pitfalls, highlights?
--if this person was a friend, what else would you tell them?
--now, for yourself, what aspects of what you just described would you recommend doing differently
--which aspects of your description do you think are absolutely necessary

I'm interested in your views of the County Collaboration aspect of the first year. Tell me what you thought the County Collaboration meetings accomplished.
--describe your level of participation
--what was helpful
--what was not so helpful
--what would you change, add, or leave out about the County Collaboration process

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Let's also talk about the role your county's coach has played in the Smart Start process.
--describe his/her involvement
--would you recommend to new counties that they request a team coach--
---tell me more about that
--what would you change about the role/process of having a team coach

The Partnership, by design, is composed of a broad mix of people and agencies/institutions. Tell me how that mix works in practice.
--who are the most visible (audible) "players" during meetings
--to be there and to be active might be two different things. Who does this apply to in your experience
--what do you think about this
--what's been done to involve them more
--what have you learned from trying to work in such a diverse team

For Non-Traditional Stakeholders especially, but perhaps appropriate for others as you see them:
What issues in particular have you faced in participating in this process?
--ever served on such a team before
--have there been issues/problems with authority, equality, etc.
--what can you tell me about your impressions from your very first meeting, e.g., anxiety, successes, surprises, etc.

What areas are getting the most emphasis from your team?
(We are interested in broad areas, such as children, day care, health, parenting skills, and collaboration, AND specific activities such as home visits, community classes, etc.)
--how did your team arrive at these emphases, e.g., team composition, critical needs, conscious effort
--how do you expect these emphases to change over time
--any projects focusing specifically on children with special needs

Of the Smart Start projects that have already begun to be implemented, what is your sense of how much they look alike between the proposal and action? *Bring along a copy of your county's Short Term Plan to use as a reference point. Depending on their progress, the Long Term Plan might also be in order.*
--how have contracted agents provided feedback, progress reports, effects, etc.
--any particular projects that you, yourself, have seen/been a part of the implementation
--in the case of significant changes, what was the process, if there was one, for Partnership approval

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What can you tell me about your Partnership's efforts for community outreach?
--how have you all tried to "sell" Smart Start
--which groups do you target for outreach efforts
--what types of activities have you found more/less effective

We have discussed a wide range of aspects of your participation and impressions of the local Partnership. Is there anything else I should have asked you about, or anything you want to add to what we've already discussed?

Thank you for your time and cooperation. We will use your comments along with information from interviews in the other counties, anonymously of course, to compile the qualitative component of the Smart Start evaluation. In particular, we want to describe for both the State and future Smart Start Partnerships the daily reality of how these teams work and perhaps channel your suggestions for what aspects should be re-thought.

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